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Pandemic Positives?



There is no doubt that the worldwide pandemic has had far-ranging negative (and in some cases catastrophic) effects on people's lives and will do so for years to come. The spread of the SARS-2 virus continues and will be with us for the foreseeable future. If scientists can develop and deploy effective vaccines, perhaps this virus will join other viruses and become manageable. However, if the virus shows resistance or the ability to rapidly mutate, containment of this pathogen may rest in successful COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) therapies, such as is currently the case for the human immunodeficiency virus.

There are now multitudes of articles and commentaries related to the horrors of the contagion and challenges to mitigate the damages it is causing to many societies. Health care workers have not been spared from the hardships due to the pandemic. Many have lost their lives while caring for COVID-19 patients, while others have lost their income and, in some cases, jobs, secondary to hospitals and ambulatory facilities being required to limit the types of care allowed to be provided. Dentists in general, and oral-maxillofacial surgeons in particular, saw their ability to provide care sharply curtailed for months, forcing many to lay off team members, although as of this writing, in most parts of North America, dentists have been allowed to return to providing patient care if they can meet requirements set by public health authorities. Nonetheless, challenges to providing oral-maxillofacial surgery services will continue as the pandemic waxes and wanes over the coming months.

So why an editorial just recounting the obvious harmful effects of this pandemic? Is it possible that any good can come from such a horrific event in world history? Well, as an inherently optimistic person, I believe there are; namely, things that have arisen out of the surge of the SARS-2 menace that may not have otherwise appeared, at least not as soon as they have. I'll try to provide some examples of what I consider some hopeful outcomes from the pandemic.

In some ways, physical distancing and work-from-home requirements are bringing us closer together. Although these requirements made workplace interactions and even commuting become considered a public health danger, several positive things have resulted. Time with one's family has dramatically risen for many, allowing for more quality time with family members. Granted, some may consider spending so much more time with loved

ones to be taxing to some degree; however, for many, it gives children more time to enjoy being with and learning from parents and vice versa. This may be the most endearing experience and memory arising from this era in our history. Another humanizing aspect of this pandemic comes from the need to regularly teleconference with colleagues or watch prominent people doing so. I find it interesting that through teleconferencing we are getting the chance to peek into aspects of other people's lives we would otherwise not see, such as their surroundings (commonly some aspect of their home) or choice of background during conferencing, as well as what they wear when they are "out of uniform" and self-grooming or how they respond when interrupted during a meeting by a child or pet "video-bombing" the session. These special windows into the lives of others help us realize that we share more common aspects of our lives than we may have otherwise appreciated.

Society is benefiting from less air pollution and fewer traffic accidents as stay-at-home requirements are or were in place. After reopening, restaurants are taking frequently touched items, such as saltshakers, off tables, possibly helping individuals needing to restrict their sodium intake. There is a greater admiration for health care workers than I can ever remember, as well as increased appreciation for the value of science and scientists, in addition to public health officials. We also are seeing remarkable outpourings of empathy and generosity due to the pandemic. Reportedly, animal shelters are being emptied as people find comfort in rescue pets.

For many surgeons, the limitations on providing care afforded them opportunities that mirror others working remotely or unable to be fully engaged at work. These include more time to enjoy more "mundane" activities such as reading more books and watching movies or other forms of entertainment that were previously difficult to do due to being so busy. Many have taken to getting more exercise such as hiking and bike riding or to learning new skills or honing existing skills such as cooking, woodworking, bird-watching, or gardening. (I resisted the practice of naming my sourdough culture but have made some delicious crumpets from the culture-feeding process discards.)

In the health care field, we are witnessing several transformations being accelerated. Telehealth initiatives, even in our specialty, are providing greater access to health care, as well as greater patient, and even

provider, convenience. A long-needed focus on what are often tragically poor conditions in extended care facilities such as nursing homes is occurring. America will learn from this pandemic, and that experience will undoubtedly promote the creation of improved strategies for patient care and preparing for future pandemics.

In our own specialty, we are seeing an even stronger emphasis on employee and patient safety over and above that which was already underway. We are learning that our association has sharp legal minds reviewing our affairs as exemplified by having “pandemics” included as an escape clause in association contracts. One change that may last beyond the pandemic is conducting many American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons committee, and even Board of Trustees, meetings through teleconferencing. I imagine this may save hundreds of thousands of dollars, in addition to limiting time away from practice and family for committee members. Probably the finest example in oral-maxillofacial surgery of a positive by-product of the pandemic is the creation of a learning consortium among US oral-maxillofacial surgery residency programs. Through the use of teleconferencing technology, a sizable group of residencies across the country are now sharing knowledge and learning between programs, exponentially magnifying the educational

value residents (and faculty for that matter) are able to consume. Hopefully, this initiative will endure long after the pandemic ends.

Societal tragedies, such as the pandemic caused by the SARS-2 virus, place terrible burdens on all of us to varying degrees, including those related to our behavioral health. There is no attempt to imply that some positive aspects of this pandemic in any way balance out the awful consequences suffered by individuals and society. Yet, there are some glimmers of silver linings. Disruptions of the magnitude of this pandemic obviously create challenges, but they also allow for a rethinking of how things are done, speeding innovation and harkening improvements in how we live our lives, how we practice our craft, and how society views us. Paraphrasing Winston Churchill, we should let no crisis go to waste. We each should take this opportunity to find ways to use the lessons we are learning, putting them to use improving ourselves, our family lives, our businesses, our specialty, and life for our fellow citizens.

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